

The. Illuminating Lantern

An exposition of subtleties from the Qur'an

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I.M.A.M.

Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ (no. 112: Devotion)

Verses 1–4

In the name of Allāh, the All-Beneficent, the All-Merciful

112:1 Say, ‘He, Allah, is One.

112:2 Allah is the All-embracing.

112:3 He neither begat, nor was begotten,

112:4 nor has He any equal.’

1. Absolute oneness of essence

The significance of this *sūrah* is the same as that of Ayat al-Kursī insofar as it describes the Lord and styles Him with the most exalted attributes, namely, absolute oneness of essence (*aḥadiyya*), the absence of any equal to Him, whether in essence, attributes, or deeds, the logical corollary of which is that He alone is worthy of turning to in every matter, and that He is exalted above any composition such that He would need any other being or that would require Him to take on a physical form.

This is why this *sūrah* has acquired such a special place of honor—because it expounds the loftiest realities of existence in a few short verses. In a narration from Imām al-Ṣādiq (as) about the *mi‘rāj*, we read that Allāh said to the Prophet (s), “Recite [the *sūrah*] ‘Say Allah, He is One’ as it came down, for it is My attribution and My description.”¹ Which is why it is appropriate to affirm the contents of this *sūrah* by saying, “Thusly is Allah, my Lord!” (*kadhālik allāhu rabbī*) after we recite it in prayer.

1. *ʿIlal al-Sharīʿa* 2/315

2. Equal to a third of the entire Qur'ān

Narrations² state explicitly that this *sūrah* is equal to a third of the entire Qur'ān, and this has been explained in a number of ways:

- This is with regards to the doctrinal teachings of the Qur'ān as represented by divine unity (*tawḥīd*), prophethood (*nubuwwa*), and resurrection (*ma'ād*). This *sūrah* undertakes to expound the first of these three.
- This is because the very foundation of the *sharī'a* is knowing Allāh in three dimensions, namely, with regards to His essence, His attributes, and His actions. This *sūrah* also undertakes to explain the first of these three.
- Insofar as the Qur'ān in its entirety revolves around beliefs, morality, and parables of peoples past, this *sūrah* undertakes to explain the first of these three.

3. Four *sūrahs*

There is a certain affinity between the four *sūrahs* towards the end of the Qur'ān that begin with the command “Say...!” (*qul*), namely Sūrat al-Nās, Sūrat al-Falaq, Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ, and Sūrat al-Kāfirūn:

- In al-Ikhlāṣ, the aspect of affirmation is dominant, namely, that of turning to the aspect of lordship and all of its corollaries such as relying only upon Allāh in seeking one's needs.
- In al-Kāfirūn, the aspect of negation is dominant, namely that of turning towards any object of worship besides Him, and both of these *sūrahs* are connected to the actions of the heart.
- As for al-Nās and al-Falaq, they both expound the way to being saved from the evil of every whisperer (*muwaswis*) who bars the way to obeying Allāh and the evil of every envier who envies one's blessings and the harm of every evil thing,

2. See, for instance *al-Kāfi* 4/644; *Wasā'il al-shī'a* 6/225

whether the darkness of the night or a sorcerer's witchcraft.
All of this is connected to the actions of the limbs.

4. Allāh's magnificent name

Allāh's magnificent name (*lafḍh al-jalāla*)³ appears in more than one-thousand five-hundred locations throughout the Qur'ān. This is the name used to denote all of Allāh's attributes of magnificence and perfection in their totality, as opposed to those names which signify one attribute amongst many, such as the All-Generous (*al-karīm*), the Knower (*al-ʿālim*) etc.

All the parts that make up this blessed name appear in the Qur'ān, beginning with *Allāh* itself, then *lillāh*, *lahu* and ending with the pronoun that refers to Him: *huwwa*.

5. Referring to Allāh with the pronoun 'he'

Referring to Allāh with the pronoun 'he' (*huwwa*) as a metonymy for Him (*kināya ʿanhu*), not, as some have suggested, as the subject of the sentence, followed by the magnificent name itself, conveys some deep ideas insofar as:

- It refers first to that dimension of Allāh which, in its perfection and elusiveness, is above specification and description, using the word 'he.'
- Then it refers to Him with the name that signifies His attributes, using the word *Allāh*.
- Then it refers to Him with one of His attributes ("One"), then another ("the All- Embracing").

To grasp the awesomeness of the reference to this first dimension without specifying any name or description, we must look to the words narrated from the Commander of the Faithful (as): "I saw Khidr (as) in a dream on the night before [the Battle of] Badr. I told him, 'Teach me something which will help me against the enemy!' He said, 'Say: "O He! – O He whom there is no He except He!"' So

3. Meaning the name: "Allāh"

when I awoke I related this to Allāh's messenger (s), who told me, 'O 'Alī! You have been taught the greatest name!' So it was upon my lips on the Day of Badr."⁴

6. Divine unity

The practical outcome of believing in the divine unity of the divine essence, attributes, and acts is divine unity in worship for when someone believes these things, how can they even think of worshipping anyone else? This is how we know that deepening one's theoretical understanding will help them dedicate their practical worship to Him, for it is human nature to show concern for that which will fulfil one's needs. When a person sees no efficient cause (*mu'aththir*) in existence except Him, and this is a logical corollary of the theory of divine unity, it is only natural that they will only take recourse to Allāh, even if this is only because they want to attain their goals through Him rather than Him being worthy of worship!

7. Etymology of the name "Allāh"

The etymology of the name "Allāh" denotes a state of perplexity and seeking refuge. When the Arabs use the verb *aliha*, they mean that the subject of the verb has become perplexed by something and does not know what it is, and when they use the verb *walaha*, this means that its subject has taken refuge in its object from something which it fears.

In this context, we can turn to the following narration from the Commander of the Faithful (as): "Allāh means: The object of worship about whom all creation is perplexed, and in whom all creation seeks refuge. Allāh is veiled from apprehension by sight and secluded from all thoughts and suppositions."⁵ Likewise from Imām al-Bāqir (as): "Allāh means the object of worship about whom, in trying to grasp His quiddity and encompass His quality, all creation becomes confused."⁶

4. *Tawhīd* 89

5. *Ibid.*

6. *Ibid.*

8. Wāḥid and aḥad

There is a clear difference between the Arabic terms *wāḥid* and *aḥad*. Both are translated as “one,” but it is the second which best befits the divine station. This is because when we negate *wāḥid*, this does not negate the possibility of a number above one. If you say, “One person did not come to me” (*mā jāʿanī wāḥid*), this leaves open the possibility that two or more people did. However, when we negate *aḥad*, this negates all numbers, whether in the mind or in the external world. This negation negates multiplicity in all of its forms, which is why we only use the description “the One” (*al-aḥad*) for the divine essence.⁷

This subtle use of language makes this *sūrah* an object of intense interest for those who love plumping the depths of meaning. It is narrated that Imām al-Sajjād (as) said, “Allah knew that in the end times there would be peoples of deep understanding (*awqām mutaʿammiqūn*) so Allah sent down the verse ‘Say: “He, Allah, is One. Allah is the All- Embracing...”’ and the first verses in Sūrat al-Ḥadīd up until His words ‘...and He knows best what is in the breasts.’⁸ So whoever conjectures beyond what is there will perish.”

9. Multifaceted words

The Qurʾānic approach rests upon awakening people’s intellects, so it brings words that are multifaceted and could apply to numerous meanings, words such as “*kawthar*.”⁹ Another example is the use of a third person pronoun in this *sūrah*, expressing an ambiguous concept: “Say: ‘He...’” then clarifying it “...Allah, is One.” So we see a succession of predicates for that which is hidden in the utmost with regards to its essence, even if it is manifest in the utmost with regards to its effects.

7. So the same sentence using *aḥad* (*mā jāʿanī aḥad*) would be translated as “Not a single person came to me.” The implications of this are clear in English. [Translator]

8. Sūrat al-Ḥadīd (57):6

9. Sūrat al-Kawthar (108):1

10. The word ‘All-Embracing’

The word ‘All-Embracing’ applies to that which people resort to and rely upon for the satisfaction of their needs, as is narrated from Imām al-Jawwād (as) when he was asked: “What is the All-Embracing (*al-ṣamad*)?” He replied, “The master to whom people turn (*maṣmūd ilayh*) in all matters, great and small.”¹⁰ This term cannot truly be applied to anyone not imbued with the attribute of Absolute Oneness (*aḥadiyya*), such that there is no equal to Him in essence, attributes, or acts.

“The All-Embracing” has been applied to Allāh in this verse, taking the magnificent name as the subject of the sentence, just as the attribute “One” is predicated to the magnificent name too. So each verse expounds a single aspect of the divine with a single tenor insofar as the former “Allah is the All-Embracing” expounds the aspect of divine acts while the latter “He, Allah, is One” expounds the aspect of the divine essence. It is well-known that the perfect conception of divine unity encompasses both of these dimensions.

11. Absolute oneness

The verses of this *sūrah* are arranged in the best manner possible insofar as:

- The logical consequence of absolute oneness (*aḥadiyya*) is that Allāh is the All-Embracing (*al-ṣamad*) to whom everything turns because He alone possesses all the attributes of magnificence and perfection.
- The logical consequence of His being All-Embracing is the negation of any composition (*juz’iyya*) from Him, such as being a father or a son, because every compound needs its components, and the negation of His being a trinity because a negation such as this cannot be attained unless He is completely without need of any presumed partner, whether at the level of the divine essence, attributes, or actions.

10. *Al-Kāfi* 1/91

12. The word ‘All-Embracing’

The word ‘All-Embracing’ has been explained in this *sūrah* to mean that which has no inner cavity (*jawf*). It is narrated from Imām Ḥusayn (as): “The All-Embracing is that which is without a cavity.” So ‘All-Embracing’ here means something totally solid, which of course must be a metaphorical expression referring to either:

- the fact that He is not affected by other beings, as corporeal beings can be compressed because of the spaces they contain within themselves or
- the absence of a womb in which to beget offspring, as exists in His creatures, in which case the words “He neither begat, nor was begotten” serve as an explanation of this dimension to Him.

13. The false ascription of fatherhood to Allāh

The false ascription of fatherhood to Allāh was widespread in earlier peoples, such as the claim that either Jesus or Ezra was His son as in His words “The Jews say, ‘Ezra is the son of Allah,’ and the Christians say, ‘Christ is the son of Allah.’”¹¹ Or the claim that the angels are His sons and daughters, as in the verse “they... carve out sons and daughters for Him....”¹² This is why the verse first negates fatherhood from Him (“He neither begat...”) before His being begotten, as it was uncommon to claim, as a few idolaters did, that He had been begotten by another deity.

14. Exclusivity

In Arabic rhetoric, placing something earlier in word order when it normally appears later yields the meaning of exclusivity (*ḥaṣr*). So when the Qur’ān places ‘has He’ (*lahu*) before ‘any equal,’ this indicates that only Allāh is without equal, because it is possible to conceive of an equal to everything besides Him, as all contingent beings are equal in the fact of their originatedness (*ḥudūth*) and potentiality (*qābiliyya*). Another verse that yields this exclusivity

11. Sūrat al-al-Tawbah (9):30

12. Sūrat al-An‘ām (6):100

is “Look! In Allah’s remembrance do the hearts find rest!”¹³ So this indicates that the hearts only find rest in His remembrance, the Most High—the One who has no equal in His essence has no equal in His effects, and one of these is giving tranquility to human hearts through His remembrance!

15. Equality

Equality in essence cannot apply to any being in the sense of their being two beings whose existence is necessary (*wājib al-wujūd*), but equality in action has many instances throughout history. Some give the attribute of arrangement (*tadbīr*) to other beings independently of Allāh, as did the idol worshipers or those who worshiped human beings, like those who believed that Pharaoh was the highest lord, for example!

Accepting this equality in the arrangement of worldly affairs could be a subtle form of polytheism for those who rely on anyone besides Allāh in looking after their affairs, even if they do not actually believe in that.

16. Divine unity in legislation and governance

One of the effects of a deeply rooted belief in divine unity, in addition to divine unity in worship, is divine unity in legislation and governance. This is the social dimension of divine unity, in addition to the individual dimension that is sometimes mentioned. How can someone who believes in a singular, all-embracing deity who is without equal possibly allow anyone else to rule over them unless they have been appointed by the True Ruler or to promulgate legislation in some affair whose knowledge they have not been inspired with by the All-Embracing source of revelation?

This is why the Qur’ān counts those who do not rule according to what Allāh has sent down amongst the faithless (“Those who do not judge by what Allah has sent down — it is they who are the faithless.”¹⁴).

13. Sūrat al-Ra’d (13) 28

14. Sūrat al-Mā’idah (5):44